

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DECORATION IN A MAORI MEETING HOUSE

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Abstract. A previously unpublished manuscript is presented together with illustrative material and comments.

The following brief manuscript is contained in the archives of the Ethnology Department of the Auckland Museum. It has been taken down from Te Whare Turuwhenua by an unknown scribe. The naming of the *poutahu* as the Tane pole is evidence of an East Coast-Urewera origin. Tane is the progenitor god who made man in the traditions of the Ngati Kahungunu, Ngati Porou, Ngai Tahu, Rongowhakaata and Tuhoe tribes. In the rest of New Zealand the progenitor god is Tiki. Discussion with elders have confirmed that Te Whare Turuwhenua's interpretation is correct for the Bay of Plenty or East Coast and that he was of the Tuhoe people. As yet I am unable to confirm to which tribal group he belonged although it has been suggested he may have belonged to Ngati Manawa.

This paper is illustrated by photographs (Figs. 1-5) from the Gilbert Archey annotated photo archive in the Ethnology Department. These East Coast houses show the main points described in the manuscript.

The information contained in the manuscript has been known as oral tradition but has never before been put into written form. It is now published even though exact details of its origin are as yet unknown.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DECORATION IN A MAORI MEETING HOUSE

(Informant: Tewhare Turuwhenua)

All the decoration in a meeting house is significant, and is used as a mnemonic by the people.

The front post represents Tane the father of the people, and the life-giving element, the back post represents Hine-nui-te-Po, Tane's daughter and wife (an incestuous relationship necessary because Tane was the first man, the woman he had created for his wife had died, and Hine-nui-te-Po was the only other female in the world).

Hine-nui-te-Po stands for death, and therefore the line up the Tane post, along the ridge-pole and down the Hine-nui-te-Po post represents the journey through life. The Tane pole was in old times based on the genitals of a live slave to represent the life-element going into the post. Because life returns to the sky (eternity), in the building, when the ridge-pole was to be placed on the Tane-post, a live hawk was caught and imprisoned by the end wing feather between post and ridge-pole and allowed to flap until the feather broke free and the bird flew away. Two spirals were carved on the barge-boards at the apex; these represented Male and Female. They might later be covered in the building.

The history of the tribe was depicted in the rafter pattern applied to the ridge-pole; the continuous line represented the continuity of the tribe. The genealogies of families within the tribe were shown on the rafters and they ended at a carving of an ancestor. Although female ramifications were shown, the primary line was male. The lines, spirals, buds, etc. in the pattern stood for definite people, and showed their biological relationships. The oldest family branches were nearest the Tane-pole, and the youngest were nearer the back of the building (the Hine-nui-te-Po end). The colour red signified prosperity, and black stood for adversity. The relative amounts of these colours showed how the tribe had fared. The tukutuku panels had names and were pictorial representations, but had the additional significance of providing steps by which the dead could re-mount to the tribal life-line — the ridge-pole. The common step pattern symbolised the journal [journey?] of Maui from earth to heaven.

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Fig. 1. Te Mana o Turanga house on Whakato marae, Manutuke opened in 1883, Rongowhakaata tribe, Gisborne. The *poutahu* in the front wall supporting the ridge pole. This is the Tane post, the life-giving post. Also depicted are the ancestors Ruapani, Rongowhakaata and Kahungunu. This and the left side of the house are the *manuhiri* (visitor) area.

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Fig. 2. Te Mana o Turanga. The *poutuarongo*, the back wall post, which is the post of Hine-nui-te-Po, the goddess of death. The figures depicted are Taua, Mahaki-ewekaroro and Hauiti. This post and the right hand side of the house are for the *tangata whenua* (home people).

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Fig. 3. Te Mana o Turanga. The *poutuarongo*, ridge pole, rafters and ancestral *poupou* on the wall. The ridge pole is the complete or genealogical tree, the rafters show the relationship between this and the main line, the genealogies of the tribal families whose ancestor is depicted. The ancestors to the rear are younger lines than those at the front.

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Fig. 4. Tamaterangi on Rangiahua marae, Wairoa, (Ngati Hinemauunuhiri tribe). The *heke* or rafters connect with the main line on the ridge pole. The *poupou* in this instance are painted and not carved.



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Fig. 5. Te Poho o Hiraina, Pakowhai, Rongowhakaata. This house, opened in 1885, was burnt down in 1949. There are no figures on the wall. It was likely that the wall symbolism has been left in favour of decoration as in many modern houses but *poutahu* and *poutuarongo* are still present if uncarved, supporting Haraina's backbone which still carries the genealogy.